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Historical References and Literary Allusions in Ahab's Wife

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In Sena Jeter Naslund's 1999 novel *Ahab's Wife*, books and their details of remembered passages are embedded in consciousness, especially in times of crisis. I begin with the most conspicuous illustration:

Both mother and daughter suspect this is going to be a difficult birth. Young Una Spenser, named after Edmund Spenser's character in *The Faerie Queene* (the mother has just re-reminded the daughter), is pregnant by Ahab for the first time. He's off whaling, captaining the *Pequod* and yet to encounter the white whale. So, Una returns to the home she has long been absent from, in backwoods Kentucky. In the previous chapter, Una has admitted that her husband Ahab reminds her of the Red Cross Knight: "A whale is not unlike a dragon [. . . who] sends up a plume of water instead of fire" (Naslund, *AW* 400).

Now it is chilly. We notice the chapter title (numbered 90 of the 157 total): "A Winter Tale." (Una has enriched her education from her aunt and mother's treasured reading collection by having Shakespeare's Works as her companion on her own earlier whaling voyage, conveniently cross-dressed, disguised as cabin boy. So even the chapter title makes us recollect a literary connection, to a Shakespearean romance, *A Winter's Tale,* and perhaps to a

childbirth in that work). The mother offers to read to the bedridden, heavy growing daughter:

> "Now, what would you have me read?" [the mother] asks.
>
> "Keats. 'The Eve of St. Agnes.'"
>
> "But it's morning, Una."
>
> "I want to eat the language," I replied, "and feel it with my fingers." Such a richness we seemed to have together [Una thinks, about her mother]. I wanted rich words, and none are richer than Keats's.
>
> [We assume the mother reads aloud for a while.]
>
> "I think he must have studied Spenser," my mother said. "Do you happen to know?"
>
> I knew only the poems themselves, but I loved this insight my mother offered, her sense of connection and influence among separate literary figures. I would ask Margaret Fuller if Keats had read the Elizabethan. (Naslund, *AW* 403)

Yes, previous chapters have described Una's meetings with Margaret Fuller. Yes, we are almost tempted to chuckle outright in the over-conscious, over-deliberate calling up of literary texts and historical and literary characters in Una's first-person female *bildungsroman*. A few lines later Una recites from "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Ahab's correspondence to Una is sprinkled with Shakespearean cadences and quotations. *Ahab's Wife* is at once a sure-fire

page-turner worthy of status as book club selection as well as a deeper text, overtly paying homage to Melville's dense narrative. Moreover, this novel invites at least one re-reading and becomes more appealing with further study. The richly allusive text is powerful not simply for its grand scope of female adventure--one that the *New York Times* asserted was overdone optimism, a "glistening pink utopia"--but for its layered and interwoven references to works of literature that are Una's maternal inheritance (D'Erasmo). My study is a combination of a three-layered task. (Not all layers will be visible or thoroughly explored in this short paper.) The first is to notice, mark and catalog the allusions to literature and references to history. (To assist in this, I prepared a spread sheet to track the cross references to particular authors, titles, and categories of information.) The second makes observations on the shape of the book in light of these lists of references. The third layer is analysis: how do the observations add up; how can we evaluate our reading experience based on the patterns of reference woven into the book; what might cause the disagreements over the assessment of the book?

Those readers enriched by the indirectness of Melville's allusions may feel that Naslund's narrative makes use of forced connections. (In other words, more of her allusions are overt while more of Melville's are innate.) Though this seems accurate upon first observation, I've come to have a better appreciation for how embedded the best of her references are, and how artificially announced are

some of Melville's. Una sometimes announces titles of works more than she absorbs them or indirectly lifts from the language of her poets. She explains that her early tutoring comes from her mother and aunt's box of treasured books. When she happens to meet Margaret Fuller, at a bookstall on the streets of Boston, she is quickly invited into the world of Fuller's "Conversations for Women" (374-5). Despite future disappointments, she will think of Fuller as mentor and confidante. At times, the fact of her writing to Fuller is merely announced and tracked, a mere plot device. Ironically, the feminist does not always influence the young star-gazer and sea-farer but the other way around: Fuller gets some of her practical feminist principles from Una.

I will argue that, thanks to the multiple entry points--not simply from Melville's whale story--but from much of the literature and events of the times, Naslund's novel offers multiple ways to read. At certain times, it seems a parody. At other times, it tells of human tragedies beyond simple loss and guilt. It reveres yet unravels *Moby Dick*. It wants to be a first-person account unlike any other. Yet I see it linked not only to other women's canonical fiction but also to other potboilers that must begin with an over-violent, over agonizing event, *in media res*. If Naslund's own characters call up conscious echoes to Hamlet and the mad Tom in *King Lear*, the author behind the work also calculates—and gives her character her own calculations about-- another version of Shakespeare, one that refuses to be tragic, despite inconceivable losses. Una herself is conscious of the alternative resolutions of the Shakespearean Romance and shortly after her

meditations upon Keats and Spenser, she turns to Shakespeare for consolation. She has just lost both her infant and her mother. Una has "shaped" her story by making these losses the first chapter. Then she justifies her "voyage of telling" by stating that she "needed to tell those terrible things first, to pass through Scylla and Charybdis" (Naslund, *AW* 405), thus invoking Homer's voyage-challenged Odysseus. She would otherwise be "unable to complete my story, if those terrors loomed ahead" (405).

So, we have a three-chapter out-of-sequence opening section which describes (almost incomprehensibly) Una's birthing and loss of her first child. It is made more gripping because a female runaway slave, hiding even from Una, comes out from under her and from between two mattresses to assist in the birth, despite the threats of just departed bounty hunters. Una's mother has gone to seek help but freezes to death in a snowstorm. Una restitches the fullness of her perspective on life after Ahab with a linking chapter and then justifies an ambitious, nearly ninety-chapter coming of age saga, explaining her youth and adolescence to come back full circle to her Kentucky cabin. And then, in Chapter 93, "Shakespeare and Company," Una takes up again a reading of her already familiar Shakespeare as her companion for her despair. Over the course of the few pages in which she records her meditations, she moves from the "love between parent and child [in *King* Lear that] broke my heart" (417) to an exclamatory remark, "And the women in Shakespeare who impersonated men! I had done that, too" (417). Here, Naslund assumes rather that mentions the

women characters of Shakespeare in order that Una rush to her insight. (The power of allusion, however, is intended to make us mindful of Portia and the two Violas, of Rosalind and Imogen, and thus to recall their situations that resolve happily. Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines win marriage as the perfection of their lives.) Una's days of seafaring in disguise as a cabin boy have not been so glorious. Thus, it is with some guilt and pain that Una goes on to confess:

> Perhaps I had stepped so easily into the idea [of passing as male] from having read him. The image of my aunt and my mother swashbuckling in the attic—Agatha and Bertha younger than I had been boarding the *Sussex*—wounded me, presented my mother's space as vacancy. (417)

Instantly, without a pause, Una experiences epiphany, and instinctively begins to draft a letter to her friend and mentor, Margaret Fuller. She rehearses the "moral obligation" of an author in light of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* because a friend from Nantucket has described its copycat impact: all over Europe, young people imitated the suicide of the fictive hero. Una poses this question of models from books as if to Margaret Fuller, though less than a paragraph later she abandons her letter. (Instead, she "stared into the fire and decided to eat something sweet"—418!) Yet her speculation exposes Naslund's strategy in shaping her book, I believe:

> And if one wrote for American men a modern epic, a quest, and it ended in death and destruction, should such a tale not have

> its redemptive features? Was it not possible instead for a human life to end in a sense of wholeness, of harmony with the universe? And how might a woman live such a life? (417)

The passage forms a central crux or turning point in the novel. As literate readers, engaged in the trick of historical-literary fiction, we know that not only Ahab's life but also Margaret Fuller's ends in death at sea. Ahab's later obsession with the whale that is yet to take his leg has to be a major part of the arc of the resolution of the book. Brilliantly, Naslund will tip into Una's later narrative the reports from ships that have encountered the Pequod on its last voyage, lifting from and transforming their purpose in Melville. It is inevitable, furthermore, that Naslund's first sentence of the novel, "Captain Ahab was neither my first husband nor my last" will lead us to her meeting with Ishmael. But Una and Naslund have more in mind than Shakespeare's romance resolution. From this point on, the allusive references, I think, move from predominantly literary and classical to predominantly historical and persuasively progressive. Specifically, Una fills in her coming of age story with the dual resonances of feminism and anti-slavery. To undertake each of these, the characters must absorb a critique of the gods of old; thus, Una and other characters—even Ahab--try out new forms of religion and reject the less progressive, which are represented most severely not by Ahab but by Una's brutal father.

Naslund lifts her story of her heroine's whaleship's stoving by a whale from the historical account of the *Essex* (as Melville also did, more elliptically).

Here, perhaps is as good a place as any to inject the premise that each individual reader's experience with a book like *Ahab's Wife* is conditioned on private circumstances. I first undertook a complete reading of the text last fall, a year after its initial release, after I had completed *In the Heart of the Sea,* Nathaniel Philbrick's non-fiction account of *The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*, which has since won the National Book Award. (And I had taken up that book because I was more convinced than ever that there was more in *Moby Dick* than I had been able to convey to a survey class in American Literature.) In Naslund, the *Essex* is not at first referenced directly, but Una dresses as male and is hired as cabin boy for the "*Sussex*," which meets an identical fate. For me it was perhaps too easy, and all the more enjoyable to catch Naslund's indebtedness to the original story of the *Essex*. Even though her *Sussex* captures parallel events as a clever analogue for her heroine, she later mentions the historical Captain Pollard as the *Essex* survivor whom Ishmael has come to Nantucket to interview (644 -- as Melville had). As Philbrick makes clear, the entire seafaring world knew of the *Essex* when Melville created his elaborate prequel. Not merely was the whale's attack on the whaler an unnatural event, but the survivors' story exposed the horrific irony of having to resort to cannibalism among themselves after choosing to risk a longer voyage to avoid the suspected cannibals in the western Pacific Islands. Survival to some seemed possible only if they elected to slaughter one of their own as food to sustain the others. It is Captain Pollard's young cousin, but Una's captain's son, Chester, whose lot is drawn for sacrifice and who speaks

nearly the same words as the young boy of the *Essex*, "It is as good a fate as any" (225). In both *Ahab's Wife* and in the non-fiction account, the human cost of surviving at the expense of others is immense. Of Una's two friends of her adolescence, one, Giles, commits suicide; the other, Kit, whom she marries, goes mad. Insanity and the guilt of violating human decency creep up repeatedly in later passages of *Ahab's Wife*, and the events as survivor of the *Sussex* threaten to seal Una's destiny.

What is "overdone optimism" for some readers seems to me a grateful salvation that is accorded to the Una whose instinct is to change--and who cannot give up on life. Margaret Fuller and the brooding Ishmael, are hardly the only touchstones to previously anticipated events. On the richly defined Nantucket of the 1830s and 40s, feminism is emergent because Maria Mitchell is beginning her career as astronomer. In one real coup of clever plotting, Maria, who has previously confided to Una that she hopes to win a Danish prize for sighting a new comet, calls Una away from guests at a party to witness her discovery (636-7). This interrupts and prolongs Una's first direct encounter with Ishmael.

Frederick Douglass as a presence in Nantucket also seems as logical as any all-inclusive historical fiction which chooses to be set here. Douglass makes his earth-shattering address, escorted by William Lloyd Garrison. But Una / Naslund incorporates the event as a conversion experience for a previously introduced bounty hunter who, on a mission to recapture Douglass, becomes a

committed abolitionist. On her way to pay Fuller a visit in Concord, Una has a strange and creepy encounter with a man who resents Una as a disciple of Fuller; he is Hawthorne, lurking in the Walden Woods, covered with a black veil; and he also seems to resent Una as one of the "tribe" of scribbling women whom the later Hawthorne will see as his nemesis (494). He pretends he is paying her a compliment by letting her know he knows she is pregnant and calling her "a cousin of these scarlet trees" (494). By this time, Una's Hawthorne has revealed himself as a man rooting for stories not his own and awed by Una's natural abilities to find literary meanings in small phrases. For me, Una's innate exposure of his misogyny is all the more delightful in the context of recent feminist criticisms of Hawthorne's fiction.

In Concord, neither Fuller nor Emerson is at home, but Mrs. Emerson gives Una a room for the night. Later, back in Kentucky, Una's left behind copy of Emerson's *Nature* becomes a runaway slave's primer. And Thoreau is alluded to in passing when Una's cousin boasts that their own experiment in living at a lighthouse in their youth is "more authentic" than his at Walden Pond (601).

In her epilogue, Naslund's Una could have directly encountered Henry David Thoreau on the shore of Fire Island, searching for Margaret Fuller's trunk of papers. (It would have been more historically accurate.) Instead, Una bumps into a precocious child who introduces himself as Henry James and who speaks in a "spiraling sentence" (664). His elliptical remarks suggest that perhaps Naslund is allowing herself room for a sequel, one that confronts, from a 21st

century feminist consciousness, the problems of women in the latter part of the 19th century. (Again, if we are aware, not only of Hawthorne's scathing parody of Fuller in *The Blithedale Romance*, but also of James's curious and detached correction of Hawthorne's impression of Fuller in his "Margaret-ghost" passage of *William Whetmore Story and His Friends*, we are rewarded by this cleverness of plotting.)

Some will think that by conjuring a five-year-old Henry James on her third-to-last page, Naslund is overdoing her ending in a token grasping for closure. This is a novel that I didn't want to end, and why, perhaps, its denouement is almost sure to be a disappointment on some level. There are too many quick and convenient threads tied off, or deliberately left hanging. More than once, the resonance of the text is overdone, but for a purpose. There are not only Liberal, the billy goat (who dares to butt Giant, Franny and young Una's name for their lighthouse) but a ship named *Liberty* on which Una sends her adolescent son to Europe as well as two infant children named Liberty who die before we are introduced indirectly to a third infant Liberty, the black infant whose real name must be kept a secret. Besides the clever Jamesian twist, we need to know more of what will become of Susan, the runaway of the first chapter who elects to go back south, to be re-enslaved in order to be with her mother. Susan finds her mother an amputee for attempting to run to her freedom, she herself is forced to be branded to prevent her future escape, but because she has been taught to write and because she has secretly named her

baby Liberty, there is hope for their future (despite the fact that Una is unable to trace her whereabouts).

Previously, Susan has written of a mysterious trunk she sighted at the great body of water. While waiting for it to lap to shore she fantasizes it is full of hot, fresh bread. Instead, it contains two works in German, *Faust* and *Werther*, and reams of sky-blue paper, much of it unused, some of the writing washed away, but with one full sentence she can make out: "Of all the Greek myths that of Orpheus and Eurydice is the sweetest I know" (537). Surely, Naslund wants us to guess Margaret Fuller, even though Una herself does not connect Fuller to Susan's personalization of this sentence. Susan has admired the sentence by Fuller, but enacted the daring and almost self-destructive variation upon the myth. To Una's disappointment, Margaret has earlier sent Una copies in German of two of Goethe's books; she had to acquire English translations "by another route" (387). Also disappointing is that Margaret Fuller has used some of the same phrases she used in letters to Una in her publication of her travels on the Great Lakes. Yet the search for Fuller's trunk of her posthumous papers that forms the intrigue in the epilogue is more fitting because Susan's earlier trunk has revealed these other copies of the German texts.

Naslund, moreover, wants us to see a connection between the trunk that gives Susan hope and the coffin that saved Ishmael as a buoy –and which, miraculously, contained the last testaments of Starbuck and Ahab. Ishmael describes his effort to peel away the tar that sealed that part of the coffin, and,

adrift at sea, before being picked up by the *Rachel*, has presumably kept his sanity by memorizing the papers that he later recites to Una.

Some would dismiss this elaborate convenience of letters in the voices of other characters with the thought: How coincidental the plotting, as if the writer behind Una could not settle for one voice, but had to show off her abilities to construct and sustain the language of Ahab and the language of her just literate black slave!

But Melville's Ishmael tried this too, in his "soliloquy" chapters. And for Una, there is a different concluding metaphor for the power of words, and how words get constructed into narrative, than the mystery of those left in sealed trunks to be found by others.

Una, even before she has met Ishmael, is writing her life story, spurred by her cousin Franny. When she discovers that Ishmael's brooding over the events he has survived give him a parallel need, she asks him, "Do you mind if we write the same book?" (663). Ishmael's reply is to encourage her work by calling up the twin towers of the Chartres cathedral. They were built a century apart and do not match, "but without both spires, our Chartres would not be Chartres" (663). Earlier in the novel, we recall, Ahab has described to Una his own inspiration from Chartres (476), and it has all the expected religious imagery except for its twin towers. It has stone arches that remind him of whale ribs and stained-glass light that makes him fiercely resentful that it is not light from whale oil. He tries to tell himself that unlike Prometheus who steals from the gods, he

undertakes an honest pursuit of man's source of light. Yet he feels guilty he is too happy with Una, restless for the next voyage. Ahab's recollections are perfectly suited to a character obsessed with his own demon, capable of redemption, but now, we discover through Ishmael's independent lens, incomplete.

Ahab's Wife is premised on alternatives. So are the novels *The Mists of Avalon* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. So, too, we hear, is Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone.* (But as of this date, we do not know the fate of its copyright battle with the Margaret Mitchell estate, despite the appeals for its unhindered publication by Harper Lee and others.)

Ahab's Wife, or, The Star-Gazer does more than tell the woman's side of a known classic; it explores multiple metaphors. Its allusions may in places be as overstated as Mary Shelley's are, in *The Last Man*—in which Perdita is a character. Shelley's Perdita, like Una's, echoes but inverts her function in her source. In Shakespeare, the lost child is found, but in Shelley the narrator Lionel loses his sister Perdita to suicide. Likewise, Una Spenser, fully cognizant of the holiness of the unifying spirit of her namesake in *The Fairie Queene* quarrels with her originator's simple purpose. Mary Shelley, in addition, goes so far as to insert footnotes to identify a few of her many of allusions; and she has her narrator, the sole survivor of a world-wide pandemic, take his complete works of Shakespeare for his only companion, just as Una does.

Although *Ahab's Wife* also worships the greatness of Shakespeare, it is structured to reject tragic outcomes. While Melville and his characters merely prove they know their bible and accept the rich legends offered in it, Naslund gives us a novel that is probing and problematic in the ways it asserts an alternate system of belief from one so explicitly biblical. It has to disappoint some readers, for they are reminded of works they haven't read but maybe should have, if they expect to be any match for Una's thoughts. For myself, professor in Shakespeare, occasional instructor for survey of American Literature--and so a re-reader of Melville if only for his adeptness at recycling Shakespeare--*Ahab's Wife* is that rare achievement that also repays analysis. I predict it will continue to be recognized as a novel that has a life beyond its first publicity.

I learned that Sena Jeter Naslund looks back appreciatively at one place she felt she received her start as a writer. According to her comments in an interview with John Woodley, her high school English teacher wrote "A!" –with a trail of plus, plus, plus, plusses on her creative rewrite of Portia's part in *Julius Caesar.* And so, I think that if she has not left herself room for her own continuation of Una's story, she has perhaps left open the invitation for others to take it up at least one or two of her silhouetted characters, a century from now.

References

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"An Interview with Sena Jeter Naslund, Author of *Ahab's Wife, or the Star Gazer*." With New York journalist John Woodley. *Mostly Fiction Book Reviews*, Reprinted with permission from FBS Associates, copyright MostlyFiction.com, 1999-2002, http://www.mostlyfiction.com/authorqa/naslundQA.htm.

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Also see the accompanying documents in Excel, a detailed chart of the literary and historical references.

This paper was read in the presence of the author of *Ahab's Wife*, Sena Jeter Naslund, at the Alabama Writers Symposium in Monroeville AL, May 2001. Naslund was presented the Harper Lee Award that year.